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HOMŒOPATHY AND THE DOCTRINE OF SIGNATURES.

OUR friends the homœopaths claim to be representatives of “advanced medicine,” and speak, with the pity that is akin to contempt, of the “old school.” They describe that strange creature of their own fancy, the “allopath,” as following *pede claudo* in the track of their triumphant advance, gathering such intellectual spoil as he can. A particularly good opportunity of picking up unconsidered trifles of this kind was afforded the other day by the grand annual review of the homœopathic army of Great Britain, which took place in London. We have therefore looked with eager anticipation to the appearance of a full record of the proceedings on that occasion in the hope of finding some spark of new truth which, Prometheus-like, we could steal for the enlightenment of the darkness of our orthodoxy. Nor has this hope been unfulfilled. We have found what we believe to be the true light of “advanced medicine.” Though this proves to be but a little candle, we nevertheless think it a duty to place it where it may throw its rays further than it is likely to do in “advanced” journals, so that it may shine like a good deed in a (scientifically) naughty world.

On the occasion to which we refer, Dr. John H. Clarke delivered himself of a discourse on the “Doctrine of Signatures and the Law of Similars,” in which he made the following statement : “It would almost seem that it is

to be the lot of homœopathy to rehabilitate the ancient doctrine of signatures developed and glorified by Paracelsus, and possibly utilised by Hahnemann himself and the older homœopaths for suggestions as to the properties of drugs, the outlines of which were filled out by provings and clinical observations." That Hahnemann in his fine frenzy drew inspiration from the doctrine of signatures is probable enough, for the prophet of homœopathy was, as Voltaire said of another prophet, *capable de tout*. Neither have we any difficulty in believing that the glorious destiny of resuscitating the doctrine of signatures, which was well described by Dr. Ayrton Paris as " the most absurd and preposterous hypothesis that has disgraced the annals of medicine," is reserved for homœopathy. The doctrine of signatures has so long been buried in the limbo of dead delusions that some readers may be curious to know something about it. We may therefore recall the fact that it was a belief that every natural substance possessing medicinal virtues of any kind indicates by an obvious and well-marked character or " signature," the disease for which it is a remedy, or the purpose for which it should be employed. Thus, a flower with a bright yellow colour should be good for jaundice, bloodstone for hæmorrhage, and so on. As a typical example may be cited the " signature " of tobacco as given by an ancient writer : " In the first place, the manner in which the flowers adhere to the head of the plant indicates the *infundibulum cerebri* and *pituitary gland*; in the next place the three membranes of which its leaves are composed announce their value to the stomach, which has three membranes." Paracelsus says that those who profanely doubt the value of signatures make God a liar, for it is " He that maketh medicines out of the earth and marketh them so that we may recognise their uses." When the " signature " is not clear the scientific use of the imagination comes into play. Thus, Paracelsus assures us that the frog is a specific for the plague. If we ask what Sir Toby Belch would call his " exquisite reason " for this statement, he answers, like the typical Scotchman, with another question, Why is the frog so strangely made unless it be that he is a cure for the plague ? The plague is a disgusting malady, and your frog is a disgusting beast ; could " signature " be plainer ? As further proof, adds the learned Bombastes, take the fact that when plague is coming frogs have black spots on their tongues. But by attentive study we can get still more information out of our batrachian indicator. Only mark how many frogs sit upon one another at an unusual time ; if there be ten or twenty or more, just so many human bodies shall there be thrown upon one another in one grave. Even the modern physiologist could not get more knowledge out of a frog than can be extracted with the help of the master key of this wonderful doctrine of " signatures."

This is the " ancient doctrine of signatures, developed and glorified by Paracelsus, and possibly utilised by Hahnemann himself," which it seems to Dr. Clarke to be the lot of homœopathy to rehabilitate. To do him justice, he " glorifies " it himself as much as any medieval mystic. He suggests that " a teacher of materia medica would find it of no little assistance to point out to his class the yellowness of hydrastis, the ' golden seal ' with its ' turmeric root,' the yellow flower of calendula, the yellow juice of

chelidonium, the yellow stain of nitric acid, and the yellow colour of chrome of sulphur, of picrate of iron (to mention only a few) as evident in medicines which powerfully affect the liver." Why is Thackeray's favourite " Chambertin with yellow seal " omitted ? Surely that bears a distinct liver " signature." Dr. Clarke says that " we talk glibly enough about an ' universe,' but few of us really believe in it. If we did, we should recognise that everything in the universe bears relation to everything else." Believing firmly in a universe, we recognise that in it the doctrine of signatures bears the relation to truth and reason which darkness bears to light. Dr. Clarke's " advanced " views appear to have surprised even his brethren in Hahnemann, who hardly knew whether or not to take him seriously. Perhaps, like the fat boy in *Pickwick*, he only wanted to make their flesh creep.